STREET SPIRIT

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JUSTICE NEWS & HOMELESS BLUES IN THE BAY AREA

Massive Protest at Wells Fargo Exposes Corporate Misconduct of Big Banks

by Ariel Messman-Rucker

Protesters angry over the unjust economic divide in the United States came from all over the Bay Area and disrupted business as usual at Wells Fargo's annual shareholders meeting on April 24 in San Francisco.

About 2,000 demonstrators marched from Justin Herman Plaza — the epicenter of the Occupy SF movement last fall — and converged on the Merchants Exchange Building in downtown San Francisco where about 250 shareholders gathered on the 15th floor to hear Wells Fargo CEO John Stumpf report on the bank's $15.9 billion profits from 2011.

Protesters shut down nearby streets, sat down and chained themselves together at the entrances to the shareholders meeting, and set up a makeshift stage in front of Wells Fargo on the back of a flatbed truck where labor groups, Occupiers, activists and religious leaders spoke to the crowd.

"Come out and hold your shareholder meeting with the 99 percent! Come hold your meeting with the people," shouted speaker Tanya Dennis, who is a leader with the Home Defenders League, a group of underwater homeowners fighting banks across the country.

Energetic protesters filled the streets, shouting "Embargo Wells Fargo!" and "We are the 99 percent, let us in!" They brandished hundreds of signs with slogans reading "Occupy Wells Fargo," "Stop Predatory Loans," "Abolish Student and Mortgage Debt," and "Foreclose the Banks Not Homes."

More than 150 protesters bought shares of Wells Fargo stock or had proxy statements and attempted to gain entrance to the shareholders meeting so they could confront bank executives about Wells Fargo's role in the current financial crisis, the high number of foreclosures that are reducing American families to homelessness, and its investment in private prisons.

The police blocked off entrances to the building and most protesting shareholders were turned away, even though they had a legal right to attend the annual meeting.

"I thought it was important to protest," said Rev. Dr. Mario Howell, who spoke at the demonstration after being turned away and denied entrance at the shareholders

See **Massive Protest at Wells Fargo** *page 12*

Occupy SF conducts a sit-in to shut down Wells Fargo. Ariel Messman-Rucker photos

Spending on U.S. War Machine Creates Rising Poverty

New Priorities Campaign protests military spending as a direct cause of increasing poverty and homelessness.

by Michael Eisenscher

The United States is the only superpower left on the planet. Today it possesses the mightiest military in the entire recorded history of humanity. With more than 8,500 nuclear warheads, our country has the capability of not only destroying, but actually exterminating most life on the planet.

The United States now accounts for 42 percent of all military spending in the world, and it maintains more than 1000 foreign military bases in 130 countries.

The size of our military arsenal is staggering, almost beyond imagining. With 71 nuclear submarines, the U.S. Navy has seven times more than China and more than twice as many as Russia. In addition, the U.S. fleet includes 11 aircraft carriers. No other country in the world has more than two and all of the rest of the countries together have only nine. Russia has only one and China has none.

The overkill represented by our seagoing arsenal is more than matched by our aerial forces. With 4400 bombers, fighter planes and attack aircraft, the United States has more than both China and Russia combined. Our nation also has four times as many attack helicopters as the whole rest of the world combined.

With all these weapons and such vastly superior military might, why is it that Americans still don't feel safe?

One source of the prevalent feeling of insecurity is the growing economic inequality that has dangerously eroded the standard of living for millions of people. Growing poverty, poor health care and massive homelessness have created a form of "national insecurity" that cannot be alleviated with military spending on the "national security state."

The 400 richest families in the United States have more wealth than the bottom 150 million combined. As a result, the United States has the fifth most unequal distribution of wealth in the entire world.

As of 2007, the bottom 80 percent of the U.S. population held only 7 percent of all the wealth. The top 1 percent had 42

See **Campaign for New Priorities** *page 9*

"Just Say No To The Violence Of War!" **Women hold vigil on Golden Gate Bridge in protest of militarism.** Carol Harvey photo

Everyone Matters

A Lasting Lesson from a Lost Brother

As one of Kurt Vonnegut's characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five* says, "It's a crime to be poor in America." This is a truth my brother Larry experienced for decades.

by Ken Butigan

My brother Larry would have been 57 on March 15, 2012. In the winter of 2001 he died on the streets. He had spent most of his life on the road — picking fruit, working seasonally cutting Christmas trees, but mostly hitchhiking or riding the rails by clambering into open boxcars before the railway police could spot him.

He once told me a harrowing story of scrambling up into the narrow opening between two freight cars and finding a rickety place to stand as the train whipped down the line. Not only was it difficult holding on, he had to avoid getting his leg caught in the steel coupling between the cars. Mostly he succeeded, and when he didn't, he was lucky enough to extract his foot in time to come away with only some bruises and not something worse.

When Larry was 13, he and a couple friends were arrested for stealing a six-pack of beer. His friends got off, but Larry was rocketed into the juvenile justice system. He spent six weeks in a facility 30 miles from home and was never quite the same afterward.

He graduated from high school and feverishly held on to his dream of drumming in a band, but his restlessness and disaffection drove him from place to place, and often into the mean teeth of a society that has little use for poor and homeless people. As one of Kurt Vonnegut's characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five* says, "It's a crime to be poor in America." This is a truth Larry experienced for decades.

He was jailed for vagrancy many times and was often physically assaulted. In the 1980s, he called me from a mental institution and asked me to get him out — all the drugs they were feeding him, he said, were messing up his head. I talked with the people there, who eventually released him.

He came and spent some time with me and we visited a nonprofit that found jobs for poor and low-income people. I was put off by the unexpectedly harsh tone of the staffer with whom we met. I suppose it was some variation on "tough love," but it struck me as unnecessarily shrill and condemning of someone the person had just met. Larry took off the next day.

I'm one of eight siblings, and each of us, over the years, offered help, but often Larry's justifiable wariness of the kind of help he experienced at the hands of the system kept him in motion — and on to the next arrest or physical altercation.

For years I wondered why I got involved in political activism. Much of this had to do with the charged atmosphere I experienced in graduate school when a number of powerful social movements were gathering momentum in the 1980s, including those working for a nuclear-free future or peace and justice in Central America. But slowly I began to realize that this path was rooted most deeply in a profound poignancy and indignation I felt at the way Larry was treated in this world at every turn: the trauma of systemic disregard, disrespect and active harassment.

Larry taught me that everyone matters, and it was this primal lesson that consciously and unconsciously fueled a longing within for a world whose policies, structures and conditions reflected this most basic fact.

In 1993, after a decade of activism focused on foreign policy, I worked for several years with Religious Witness with Homeless People. This San Francisco coalition of 45 churches, synagogues and mosques, under the leadership of Sr. Bernie Galvin, sought to dismantle the city's Matrix Program. In a city that at the time had 16,000 homeless people and only 1,400 shelter beds, Matrix criminalized sleeping and eating in public. Under this policy, the city police made innumerable arrests and issued tens of thousands of tickets that went unpaid (most homeless people couldn't afford the $78.00 fine) that increasingly risked being converted into jail time.

Religious Witness mounted a nonviolent direct action campaign aimed at alerting and mobilizing the populace and policy-makers for change through protests, fasts and lobbying. We organized a series of sleep-ins in the city's parks, including Union Square (at the heart of the city's fashionable downtown shopping district) and Golden Gate Park when, usually after the late local news signed off for the night, a phalanx of baton-wielding police officers would file in, roust us from our sleeping bags, and haul us off to jail.

We also challenged the law that prohibited eating in public. The police were arresting members of "Food Not Bombs" and other groups for ladling out soup to hungry people on the street. In response, Religious Witness organized a banquet for 800 homeless women and men in the space considered most off-limits by the powers that be: Civic Center Plaza in front of San Francisco's ornate City Hall.

A well-planned logistical operation delivered to the site dozens of tables, chairs, linen tablecloths, china, silverware, cut flowers, and many succulent dinner courses. Three choirs provided music.

Both concrete and symbolic, this meal was a momentary tableau of the world we longed for: where everyone sits down together, eats together, relaxes together, enjoys one another's company — while disregarding and undoing the regulations designed to separate and diminish.

Faced with the dilemma that this well-publicized feast posed, the police did not swoop down and arrest people from religious communities across the city. Front-page coverage of this event in the local press accelerated the campaign. Eventually Religious Witness succeeded in ending the Matrix program, symbolized by the then-district attorney shredding thousands of tickets.

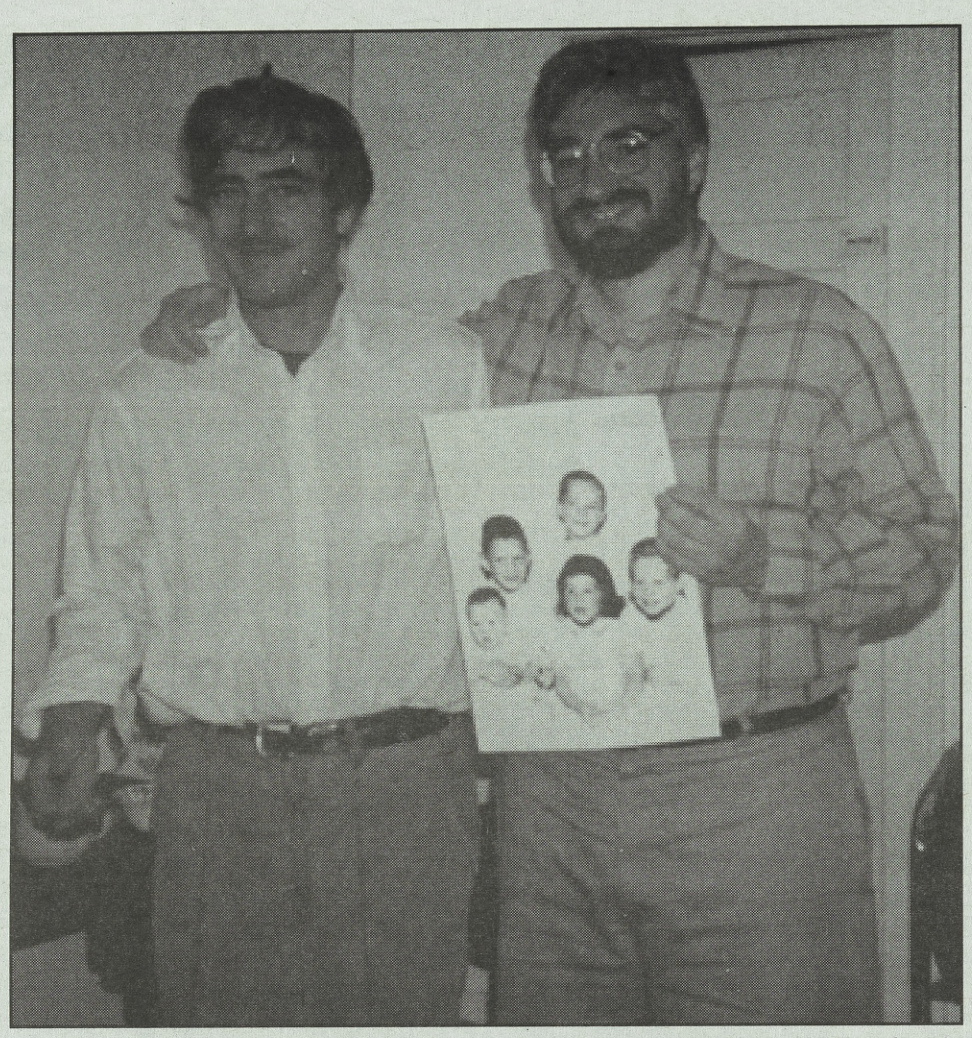
This victory did not mean the end of Religious Witness's work. New versions of Matrix have crept up over the past 15 years, and activists have had to mount the ramparts innumerable times in San Francisco and also across the country.

This vital tradition of struggling to end the ongoing attack on homeless human beings is one of the many important tributaries flowing into the river that is the Occupy movement as it readies to renew its work for economic equality.

After Larry died, there was a procession for him organized by the local Catholic Worker and homeless activists. The police tried to prevent us from going into the street, but there was something both gentle and firm in the crowd that changed the atmosphere, a sense of reverence for everyone everywhere as we washed into the streets that Larry loved, even though this was one of the places where he was badgered and arrested and sometimes prevented from occupying.

As we moved in a determined silence, the stance of the police shifted. They began to stop traffic so we could move unimpeded through the intersections and on through the downtown area, arriving finally at City Hall, where a few people spoke, imploring the city to do more for those without homes.

This year, I mark Larry's birthday by remembering his life and death and spirit. His ongoing presence stirs a longing for a time and place where the infinite worth of each one of us is taken for granted — and stokes a willingness to take action to help bring all of us a bit closer to that unending banquet.



Larry and Ken Butigan in San Francisco. Ken holds a photo of five of the family's children, with Larry at the top of this "family tree." Photo by Cynthia Okayama Dopke

OF ESCAPE

by Claire J. Baker

The homeless often change
sleeping spots:
from under a bridge
to near RR tracks;
from field-edge, among bushes
to under a landing platform
of a foreclosed factory;
from back of lumber yard
to a lean-to in the woods.

They've learned:
wiser to shuffle on, not settle
long enough to mark
a space of one's own.
Best stay in the uneasy mode
of escape,
sleep with ten eyes open.

Jesus Is Watching

by Judy Jones

money changers
money lenders
beware

one day Jesus will return
and those who did nothing
to help the dying poor
will try and hide

but their doors will be barred
and all their money burned

in return for their
hearts of stone
that allowed the poorest of the poor
to starve before their eyes

money changers
money lenders
beware

Native Son 2012

by George Wynn

Imagine being born
and raised in San Francisco
a nonviolent smart kid
intoxicated by Jean Paul Sartre
drafted into Vietnam
learning to hate and kill
coming home a shadow
of his former self
in and out of work
mostly out

Now at sixty five
limping pushing an
overloaded shopping cart
He says, "I don't have
time to be pissed
I have to survive."

How can we expect him
to get his footing
when passers-by and merchants
would prefer he didn't exist

Another Homeless Person Just Died

by Judy Jones

another homeless person just died
another homeless person just died
and not one person cried
not one person cried

cuz it's just another homeless person
that died
not people like you and me
like you and me

someone's dying
in the gutter somewhere
with nothing but their souls laid bare
nothing but their souls laid bare

homeless child eating
outta garbage can
and not one person sees
not one person sees

ol' woman fell on da street
cuz she'd had nothin to eat
nothin to eat
ol' woman fell on da street

tonight I looked in the mirror
and cried
for I saw my own soul had died
tonight I looked in the mirror
and cried
for my own soul had died

New Director Revitalizes *Street Spirit* Vendor Team

J.C. Orton talks about a vision of justice in which we are our brother's keeper, our sister's keeper. Helping people in need is "what makes us who we are," he says. "If we don't care about each other, then who are we?"

by Lydia Gans

When J.C. Orton was hired as the new coordinator of the *Street Spirit* vendor program in September 2011, it proved a big step forward for the program. Although he has only been on the job for eight months, Orton already has revitalized the vendor program and made truly remarkable improvements in the number of vendors actively working, the number of issues sold, and the overall morale of the vendor team.

Every month, Orton receives 20,000 copies of the *Street Spirit* newspaper to distribute to more than 150 registered vendors. Under his leadership, more vendors have been attracted to the program than ever before, and they have been selling out the entire 20,000 publication run every month. Best of all, vendors now feel they have someone who truly cares about them and their ability to survive on the streets.

Orton keeps in touch with *Street Spirit* vendors, makes sure they have enough papers and there are no conflicts or hassles. Most vendors are homeless or have very low incomes, and they keep the entire proceeds from their sales. The entire cost of producing the paper is borne by the American Friends Service Committee.

Almost every other homeless newspaper in America, Canada and Europe charges vendors anywhere from 25 to 50 percent of the purchase price of the paper. *Street Spirit* in the East Bay and *Street Sheet* in San Francisco are two of the only street newspapers that provide the paper entirely for free. The purity of this approach keeps alive the values of compassion and giving in a nation that tries to reduce everything to the self-seeking materialism of the profit motive.

For J.C. Orton, a longtime homeless advocate and Catholic Worker, directing the *Street Spirit* vendor program is one more way to connect with people on the streets who are struggling to survive. For years, Orton has been providing meals to homeless and hungry people, collecting and distributing clothes, sleeping bags and other supplies, providing mail service, and giving help with financial management, advice and moral support to anyone in need.

Running the vendor program, Orton says, dovetails with his other work on the street. As he gets to know the vendors and learns about their situation, he can provide help with other services they might need.

In signing up a vendor for *Street Spirit*, he asks only for a name — no ID is necessary. He just needs enough information so he can issue a badge and have a way to contact the person. The interview is more like a conversation, an indirect way of eliciting information.

Orton says that he asks prospective vendors where they slept last night. He doesn't ask if they are homeless, but where they spent last night. "What was the situation?" Orton asks.

"Well, I slept on somebody's sofa," is the reply. "Homeless, sofa," he records.

When vendors tell him they slept in a vacant building near University Avenue, or in an emergency shelter, Orton records "homeless squat" or "homeless shelter."

"Some people are vehicularly housed," Orton says. "Some pay rent, which is by far the minority. So I end up knowing how bad their situation is."

Then Orton gets to their motivation. "Where are you going to sell the paper, how many days, and at what time? And then the ultimate question: Why do you want to sell the paper? I say, don't give me a floppy answer, tell me your reason. Why do you want to sell *Street Spirit*?"

He first assures them, "I'm going to let you sell it. Some people say for money, they need to pay rent. This tells me what's on their mind at the moment."

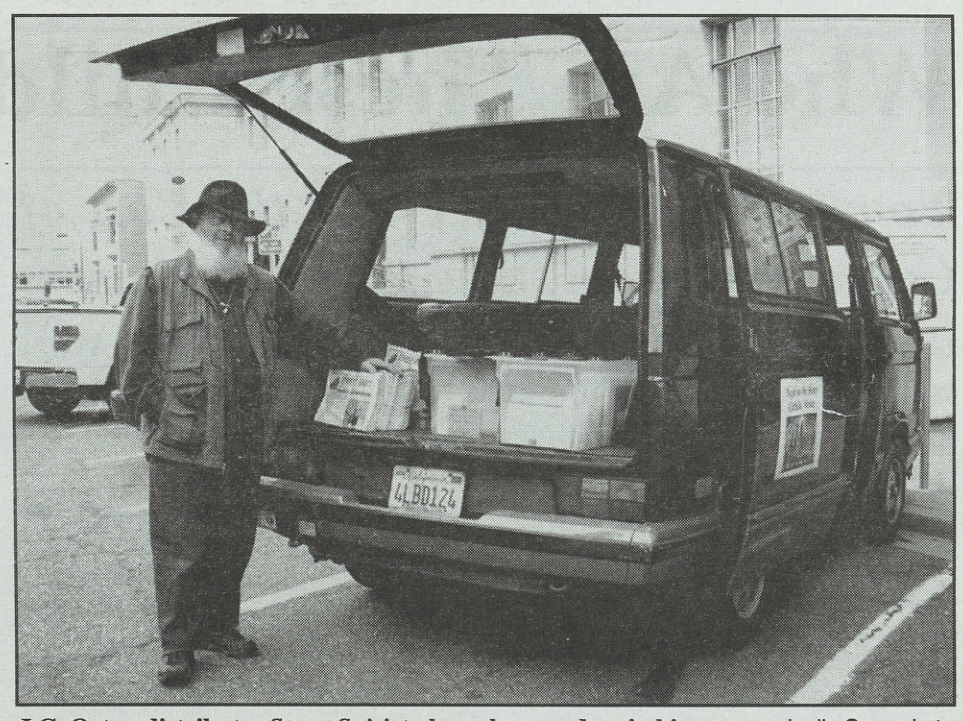
J.C. Orton continues to check with them whenever he sees them, asking how they're doing, keeping up with changes in their lives. If they have problems, he might give them referrals, and help them make connections. He lets them know he cares about them.

When Orton began directing the vendor program last September, there were only about 30 vendors. Now he has 175 signed up. About 60 percent are highly active, and the others "come and go." He explains, "They get 10 papers and you don't see them for a few months. They come back and say, 'I want to get papers again.' I say, 'Where have you been?' 'I was in the hospital, in jail or I went to Colorado and I was there for three months.' No problem."

If vendors lose an ID badge, he prints another at no charge. Previously, they were charged, but Orton has already provided 80 replacement badges at no cost, beyond the first batch of 175 he printed up. "We don't charge if you lose or ruin a badge," he says. "The idea is for people to feel comfortable about coming to me."

That leads to a word he uses frequently: "accessibility." Orton has a set of regular hours and locations every day of the week where vendors can get their papers [see sidebar]. But even beyond that, he is accessible just about all the time. He freely gives out his cell phone number, and he almost always answers the phone!

If a vendor needs papers, he tries to accommodate them. A vendor named Mike tells about the time he called J.C. to tell him he was going to his spot outside the Whole Foods Market in Berkeley at 2 p.m. and would be needing more papers. At the time, Orton was in San Leandro, but he dropped off the papers on his way back, saving Mike a trip to his house.



J.C. Orton distributes *Street Spirit* to homeless vendors in his van. Lydia Gans photo

Mike has known J.C. for a long time and talks about all the things he does: "Does mail call, gets people's mail for them, breakfasts — grits, boiled eggs, coffee — all kinds or stuff. He's an all-around good person."

There are many people out on the street who echo what Mike says: "He's an all-around good person. He cares."

Orton also provides a mail service by maintaining a post office box for people who are homeless or have no fixed address. They can meet him any time to get their mail. Although many transactions and correspondence are now done electronically, people still sometimes need an address to get checks or keep in touch with family and friends.

For 25 years, Orton has been serving as Representative Payee for people with particular disabilities who need help managing their money. Right now he is the Rep Payee for five people, paying their bills. "But I also make sure they have their groceries," he says. "I will get a checking account for (the person) and when he needs money, I go to the bank and take the money out, get a written receipt, everything's aboveboard. And I don't charge. If we charge we'd have to be bonded, lots of hassle. I do it because it's fun. Because I care about people."

And then there are the countless meals he has served in the East Bay. Working with Night on the Streets Catholic Worker over the years, Orton has been preparing breakfasts and other meals, organizing food giveaways, and driving his van all over town, offering soup on cold nights. And if a person is hungry or needs something special, he usually can come up with some goodies or snacks.

Orton also gives away many sleeping bags, blankets, socks, and all sorts of things that homeless people need. His small house and garage are like a warehouse, crammed with vast amounts of useful resources for people who are homeless. He is constantly looking for donors to provide for a never-ending need for new supplies.

The Catholic Worker philosophy means taking personal responsibility for helping neighbors in need — a set of values based on compassion, mercy and justice.

Orton talks about a vision of justice in which we are our brother's and sister's keeper. "Let people know," he says, "if they allow people to go hungry when there is so much food, if they allow people to go homeless when there is so much resources out there, if they allow people to do without clothing when there's so many clothes around, if they allow people to do without their dignity and their respect when there is so much to be given, then we're really ripping the system off — ripping off each other — because that's what makes us who we are. If we don't care about each other, then who are we?"

Street Spirit Vendor Team

The *Street Spirit* vendor program is managed by J.C. Orton. More than 150 homeless vendors sell *Street Spirit* in Berkeley and Oakland. The vendor program provides many jobs to homeless people in bad economic times, and is a positive alternative to panhandling.

Please buy Street Spirit only from badged vendors. If you have questions, comments or concerns about the vendor program, call J.C. Orton on his cell phone at (510) 684-1892.

Hours for *Street Spirit* Vendors

Vendors can call J.C. Orton at (510) 684-1892.. If he is able, he may be able to deliver the *Street Spirit* to your location.

Hours

Monday through Saturday: 7:30-8 a.m.
At the breakfast at 2362 Bancroft Way.

Monday through Saturday: 8-9 a.m.
At Peet's Coffee at Shattuck and Kittredge in Berkeley.

Mon, Tues, and Weds: 9-10 a.m.
He is parked in front of the MASC at 1931 Center Street, Berkeley.

Street Spirit

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May 2012

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Who Are These Children Dressed in Red?

Nonviolent Resistance and the Cost of Conscience, from India to Birmingham

Gandhi's satyagraha may be defined as "love force." What could be more beautiful than a form of resistance based on love for life? Yet, as Dostoyevsky wrote, "Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams."

by Terry Messman

In Birmingham, Alabama, the echoes of the civil rights movement can still be heard to this day, and the brave resistance movement that overcame the seemingly all-powerful system of segregation is a lasting blueprint of how a seemingly powerless people can overcome even the most powerful forms of injustice.

Since Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and many other civil rights leaders were so inspired by the message and nonviolent methods of Mohandas Gandhi, it was historically symbolic that Jim and Shelley Douglass, renowned peace activists and lifelong students of Gandhi, should have invited peace and justice activists from across the country to attend a retreat on Gandhian nonviolence in a Birmingham church in late March 2012.

My wife Ellen Danchik and I were among those who attended the three-day retreat with Narayan Desai, Gandhi's closest living disciple and one of the very last living links to the momentous campaign of nonviolent resistance that liberated India from British rule.

But if we traveled to Alabama in search of new inspiration from Narayan Desai, and from visiting the historical sites of the civil rights movement in Birmingham and Montgomery, we left with a deep awareness of what can only be called "the cost of conscience."

Jim and Shelley Douglass

Jim and Shelley Douglass have studied and exemplified Gandhian nonviolence for several decades. For many years, they lived in a resistance community near the Bangor Naval Base in the state of Washington, where they led a nonviolent campaign in resistance to the Trident submarine's first-strike nuclear warheads. They went on to launch the White Train campaign which organized activists around the nation to hold nonviolent sit-ins on railroad tracks to block trains transporting nuclear weapons.

In recent years, Jim and Shelley formed Mary's House, a Catholic Worker community in Birmingham, where they assist poor families and carry out peace activism. Jim Douglass is the author of such groundbreaking works on the theology of nonviolence as *The Nonviolent Cross, Resistance and Contemplation,* and most recently, *JFK and the Unspeakable,* and *Gandhi and The Unspeakable,* two books that analyze the powerful political forces behind these two assassinations.

It was highly meaningful to attend this retreat with such amazing activists as Bishop Tom Gumbleton, one of the leading peacemakers in the nation, and a man who has long been one of my personal heroes; courageous nonviolent activists Kathy Kelly and Bert Sacks, who were fined heavily for delivering medical supplies to Iraqi citizens victimized by the war; David and Jan Hartsough, lifelong nonviolent activists who exemplify the Quaker witness for peace and social justice; Ken Butigan, a nonviolent trainer and the director of Pace e Bene, a Franciscan peace group; Rose Berger, an editor of *Sojourners* magazine; Michael Nagler, co-founder of the Peace and Conflict Studies Program at UC Berkeley and founder of the Metta Center for Nonviolence; Patrick O'Neill of the *National Catholic Reporter;* and Father Louis Vitale, a Franciscan priest who has served several lengthy jail sentences recently for acts of civil disobedience in protest of American militarism.

In an interview after attending the retreat, David Hartsough said, "I personally think it was a great contribution to the movement for social justice that Jim Douglass brought together activists from throughout this country to spend a full weekend with this great disciple of Gandhi. Narayan Desai shared with all of us the spirit and the life and the important ideals that Gandhi not only taught, but lived."

Hartsough said the retreat wasn't merely a lesson in the past history of nonviolence, but rather an urgent and compelling invitation to explore how activists in America today can apply the lessons of Gandhian resistance to resisting injustice.

"Many of the people at the retreat are inspired by Gandhi and Martin Luther King in their own lives," Hartsough said. "So meeting together and developing relationships helped us cross-fertilize by sharing our activist commitments. We explored how these different kinds of activism fit together as a way to try to help transform our own society."

That was one of Jim Douglass's intents for the retreat — encouraging today's activists to consider how Gandhian nonviolence can deepen our own commitments to social justice. Douglass asked, "So who are we in relation to this question of carrying on this profound, nonviolent, transforming, satyagraha tradition of Gandhi? How are we going to explore the possibilities of transformation at the point where a national-security state will end, as it must. For all those reasons, I think we had a retreat that is life-challenging."

Since Narayan Desai is now 87, we were aware that this might be his last trip to America. He traveled to Birmingham with his daughter, Sanghamitra (Uma) Gadekar, a medical doctor, and a nonviolent leader in her own right in the anti-nuclear power movement in India.

Douglass said afterwards that one of the most moving aspects of the retreat was seeing Narayan's close relation with Uma, "whom he very lovingly describes as his daughter, his doctor and his director — or, smilingly, his dictator." Douglass added, "They have both have huge gifts and such a beautiful relationship in a profoundly nonviolent and mutually illuminating way — illuminating for all of us."

The Final Witness to Gandhi

Narayan Desai is the "ultimate, and, in a certain sense, the final witness to Gandhi," Douglass said. Narayan is the son of Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's closest personal friend, biographer, and secretary.

Douglass said, "Narayan had this totally unique experience of Gandhi up to his death. He grew up in Gandhi's ashram, he was the son of Gandhi's secretary, and he played with Gandhi in the waters of the river near the ashram. And then he was also uniquely involved with Gandhi's two greatest disciples, Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan."

Narayan Desai worked alongside Vinoba Bhave in the land-gift movement, collecting voluntary donations of land from the rich and distributing it to poor, landless people. He worked with Jayaprakash in the Shanti Sena campaigns, the Indian peace brigades that sought to nonviolently end violent conflicts.

Later, Desai became the director of Shant Sena, and was involved in founding Peace Brigades International. He was elected chairman of War Resisters' International, and has just completed a 2,300 page biography of Gandhi.

A Father-Son closeness

As a child, Narayan Desai enjoyed a father-son closeness with Gandhi, or "Bapu," as he called the leader of the Indian resistance movement.

At the retreat, Desai asked, "How was Gandhi's relation to children? I can tell you, he was first and foremost our friend. Nothing more, nothing less. We came to swim with him. There were 56 years between me and him. But we went swimming, splashing water in his face and he would be facing us off and we thought, it was a good game!"

Satyagraha, the term Gandhi used to describe his experiments in nonviolent resistance, may be literally translated as "holding firm to truth.' As Desai told us at the retreat, it can be translated as "truth force," "soul force" and "love force."

Desai reminded us that each of these three synonyms for satyagraha express nonviolence as a "force," a forceful way of struggling, not some kind of peaceful passivity. Instead, Gandhi's satyagraha campaigns were mounted as a nonviolent insurrection, a new form of rebellion that was based on love and truth and reverence for life, and yet a force powerful enough to defeat the might of the British Empire at its strongest.

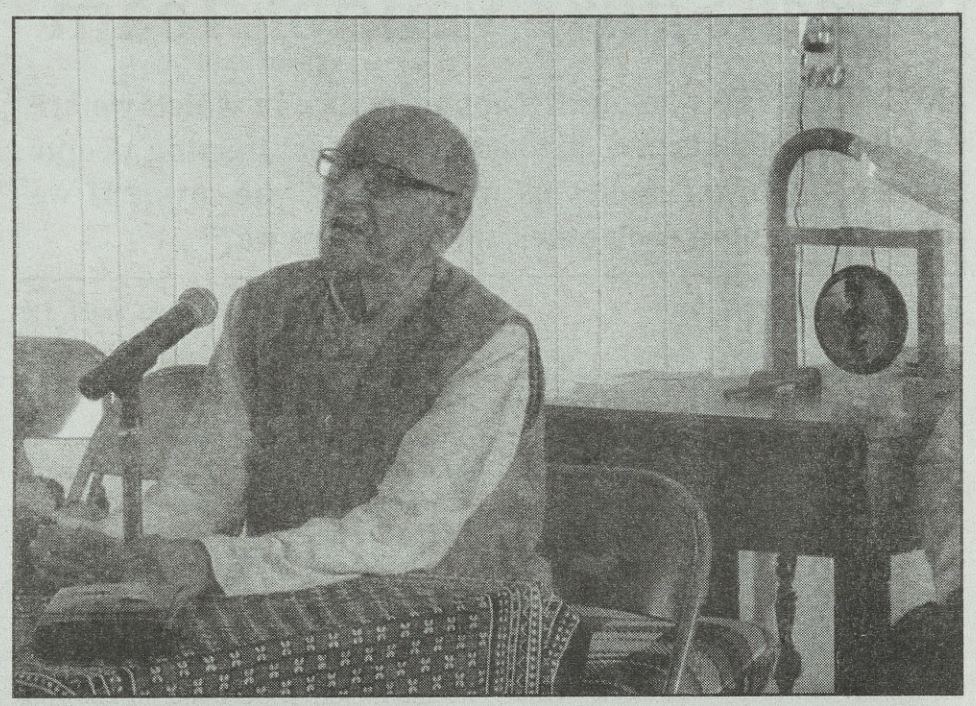
A Force that Moves Mountains

In the United States, people often misconstrue nonviolence to mean the mere negation of violence. Yet Desai explained, "To Gandhi, nonviolence was an active force that could move mountains."

Desai said that this was a crucial contribution Gandhi made to the concept of nonviolence. Until then, nonviolence was taken as something very passive and innocent. "Here, nonviolence was considered as a force that could change the world," Desai explained. "After 1945, Gandhi said, nonviolence is the only force that can face nuclear weapons. He came right out and said that."

Another groundbreaking contribution Gandhi made to our understanding of social-change movements is that revolutions need to both "*raze* an unjust system to the ground" while at the same time they

See **Who Are These Children** *page 5*



Narayan Desai, one of Gandhi's closest friends and disciples, speaks at the Birmingham retreat on nonviolent resistance. Terry Messman photo

The cost of conscience is shown in this sculpture in a Birmingham park where schoolchildren show their willingness to go to jail. Terry Messman photo

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"*raise* up something new."

To transform society, movements must go beyond opposing injustices, and also launch what Gandhi called "the constructive program" to build alternative institutions and new economic models and thereby create a renewed and more equitable society that truly serves human life.

"Gandhi was one of the very few revolutionaries who talked about both the positive and negative sides of a revolution," Desai said.

It is fairly easy for activists to see the injustices they want to raze to the ground. Desai said, "They see colonialism, they see imperialism, they see exploitation; they see color prejudice. They may see gender prejudice. And all that has to be removed — that's clear. They also know something else may take its place, but that's rather hazy, it's not very clear."

Revolutions and reform movements usually are so focused on overcoming an unjust system that little thought or effort is spent on developing a new, life-affirming vision — the constructive program.

"In Gandhi's actions, both processes went hand in hand," Desai said. "He wanted to fight against colonialism and change a system of violence, and in place of that, create a new system based on nonviolence. He started doing that while he was fighting against the violent system."

3 Conditions for Resistance

Gandhi found that blindly striking out in an ill-considered, chaotic protest was too often futile. In Gandhi's nonviolent campaigns, there were three conditions for satyagraha to be conducted with integrity:

1. The cause must be just. Resistance to injustice must be rooted in truth and activists must check and cross-check their analysis of injustice. They must be open-minded and willing to change courses if that is where the truth leads.

2. Every action must have some expression of love. It may be called compassion, it may be mercy, it may be an expression of generosity. But actions must flow from love.

3. The nonviolent resister must be prepared for the most difficult kind of suffering, physical or mental.

This third point is a very difficult one for many U.S. activists to accept, or even consider. Desai's declaration that satyagraha is also known as "love-force" is beautiful in its idealism; but when one considers the sacrifices it may demand, it can be terribly difficult and full of overwhelming hardships.

On his first night at the retreat, Desai said, "If we have enough faith in love, we are prepared to die for love. Faith in love makes us able to cope with the world's concerns. Love force can change situations. It can move mountains. It can change the hardest of hearts."

"Love force" is a beautiful way of describing a form of resistance that seeks to overcome systems of injustice through radical acts of dissent, rebellion and noncooperation — yet acts nonviolently, lovingly, always honoring life as sacred. A form of resistance that is based on a reverence for life. What could be more lovely?

And yet, I kept hearing an echoing phrase all through the three-day retreat, an echo that became impossible to ignore after we left the retreat and visited the civil rights memorials in Birmingham and Mongomery.

The echo was a warning from Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky: "Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams." Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker, discovered the truth of Dostoyevsky's stark warning when she attempted to embody "love in action" on the cruel, unforgiving streets of New York City.

In Kelly Ingram Park, this sculpture shows a child attacked by police and dogs during a civil rights march. Terry Messman photo

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute is absolutely revelatory in conveying not only the history of the civil rights movement, but capturing the *feeling* of murderous racism transformed step by step, mile by mile, arrest by arrest, martyrdom by martyrdom, into human liberation.

The Cost of Conscience

Love may move us to join a nonviolent movement, or start a Catholic Worker, and such a commitment is beautiful and inspiring — until one adds in the "cost of conscience."

Consider the cost paid by Narayan Desai. Let me repeat what he told us at the retreat: "If we have enough faith in love, we are prepared to die for love."

Narayan Desai was only a teenaged boy when his beloved father, Mahadev Desai, died in prison in 1942 while nonviolently resisting Britain's unjust colonial rule of India. Mahadev Desai willingly gave his very life in the struggle for Indian independence, and in faithful service to his friend and leader, Gandhi.

In an interview, Jim Douglass said, "The British government took 22 days to inform Narayan and his mother that his father had died in prison, which was unconscionable. And how deep a blow it was to have that knowledge and to have it so late. It had a huge impact upon him."

Yet Douglass explained that Mahadev Desai had freely given his life out of love for Gandhi. He was obeying Gandhi's oft-repeated mantra that Indian resisters must be prepared to "do or die" for the cause of freedom and independence.

"This brings home the depth of Mahadev's love for Gandhi because Mahadev understood something so profound that he gave his life for Gandhi's life," said Douglass. "Gandhi later said that Mahadev's sacrifice was not a small thing, and said that his sacrifice is bound to hasten India's day of liberation."

Narayan was left fatherless because of this sacrifice in the name of "love-force." Gandhi had always been his surrogate father, and Narayan also lived to see this beloved father figure — "Bapu" — assassinated in 1948 during the bitterly divisive and violent partition of India and Pakistan.

Narayan himself endured arrests and beatings during his own participation in satyagraha campaigns and his involvement in the Shanti Sena, the Indian peace brigades. Yet his perspective is that all these forms of suffering are to be celebrated, not regretted.

Douglass said, "At the heart of nonviolent transformation is the willingness to accept suffering. This is a perspective that we, as Americans, resist."

Accepting Jail Joyfully

Douglass related that, even as a small boy, when his father was going to jail, Narayan accepted his father's jail sentence joyfully, and would encourage him to get a longer sentence next time!

"That's the perspective of Gandhi's ashram," Douglass explained. "As the various members of the ashram went off to long jail terms, their families hoped for longer jail terms. That is not our perspective, for the most part."

This is not a matter of embracing suffering for its own sake. Nonviolent movements try to lessen the suffering of the world by resisting the deadly systems of militarism and economic oppression that cause untold suffering and deaths.

Even though nonviolent movements attempt to express reverence for life, the deeply entrenched enemies of social change are free to use every weapon in their arsenal against unarmed activists.

After all, Narayan was teaching us about nonviolent resistance in a city that was notoriously referred to as "Bombingham" because so many churches and homes of activists were bombed by the powerful forces of racism.

Douglass drew a parallel between Gandhi's willing embrace of the risks of prison, beatings and even death, and the courage of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights activists of the South.

Douglass said, "Martin Luther King suffered the ultimate price as well. King was anticipating his death and seeing it as a necessary, transforming hope that something might be gained through the redemptive power of suffering."

King was even able to see the deaths of four young girls in the bombing at the Baptist Church in Birmingham as having the potential to be redemptive.

Douglass said, "In his sermon at their funeral, King talked of redemptive suffering. That's not an easy thing to talk about in the midst of parents who have just lost their children in a terribly evil attack. This is an understanding of nonviolence that I believe has something deeply to do with the Gospel, the Beatitudes and the witness of the crucifixion."

King delivered a sermon at the funeral for three of the four girls on Sept. 18, 1963. It has come to be known as "Eulogy for the Martyred Children."

Speaking only three days after their deaths, King said, "These children — unoffending, innocent, and beautiful — were the victims of one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity. And yet they died nobly. They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity."

Then King described his belief in the redemptive power of unearned suffering, saying: "History has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive. The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as a redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city."

Birmingham Museum

Immediately after the retreat, Ellen and I went with David and Jan Hartsough and Ken Butigan to visit the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, a beautifully designed and extremely moving museum that shows the high costs paid by the Black community for their brave acts of resistance to the evil system of racial apartheid in the deep South.

The Birmingham museum is absolutely revelatory in conveying not only the his-

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tory of the civil rights movement, but capturing the *feeling* of murderous racism transformed step by step, mile by mile, arrest by arrest, martyrdom by martyrdom, into human liberation.

I wish every American citizen would visit Birmingham and Montgomery to witness the cost of conscience suffered by activists in the civil rights era. It was a shockingly heavy price paid by principled nonviolent activists who were beaten, arrested, shot, attacked by police dogs and high-pressure firehoses, murdered in cold blood, and bombed, simply for taking part in a freedom movement that peacefully tried to end the tyranny of segregation.

We all know the story. It is a beautiful story, full of some of the most inspirational moments in American history. It is beautiful, like the song lyrics to "We Shall Overcome." It is beautiful like "love in dreams." But in Birmingham, one is forced to confront the "harsh and dreadful" reality of "love in action."

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute was created in 1992 to enshrine the Freedom Movement's legacy of courage and confrontation. The museum has an uncanny power to take us back to the time when Black Americans threw off the chains of fear and placed their very lives on the line in resistance to a system of white supremacy so vicious and cruel that it even unleashed all the power of hate and violence and murder against children and ministers in prayer.

I have always admired the civil rights movement above all other movements. All the odds were against the Black community, who responded with so much perseverance, so much courage, so much love, even in the face of deadly assaults.

But when you tour the museum, arrest by arrest, martyr by maryr, murder by murder, you come to understand the overwhelming price that was paid. It shakes you to your core just to see how much was paid and how much was lost.

For many of us, Birmingham was a sacred space to study Gandhian nonviolence, a city sanctified by the unimaginable bravery of schoolchildren who defied fire hoses, attack dogs and police clubs, and ministers like Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth who endured beatings, arrests and the dynamiting of his home.

On Hallowed Ground

The Birmingham museum is located on hallowed ground, consecrated by the blood of martyrs. After we viewed news footage of police dogs attacking children marching nonviolently for civil rights, we looked out the large, floor-to-ceiling windows of the museum, right across the street at Kelly Ingram Park, a key staging area for the civil rights movement.

Kelly Ingram Park is the scene of one of the most publicized episodes in the civil rights movement. It is the park where Martin Luther King and Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth led protests for voting rights and were attacked in a violent police raid ordered by Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor.

The shocking footage of activists and young children being viciously assaulted by police clubs and attack dogs sparked a nationwide public outcry. Martin Luther King later said that the news reports from Birmingham moved the nation as nothing else had, and led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed segregation in public spaces.

It was eerie and profoundly unsettling to view the familiar news footage of these violent attacks on unarmed demonstrators and then to look out the window at the very park where it had all happened. The museum has an amazing ability to make those days come alive so one can vividly *feel* the brutality that was endured — not just by seasoned activists — but by schoolchildren.

Police dogs lunge out of this sculpture to give people the feeling of fear that civil rights marchers faced. Terry Messman photo

Inside that museum, our nation is still on trial. Those lasting images of brutality, and bravery in the face of brutality, have haunted me ever since we visited it.

In Kelly Ingram Park, sculptures by James Drake have frozen in time those moments of violence and courage so they will never be forgotten. We were struck silent by the stories etched in stone — sculptures of children behind jailhouse bars, declaring that they're not afraid to go to jail. A sculpture of a policeman and his German Shepherd attacking a small, defenseless boy. One statue of Martin Luther King and another of children, both in the line of fire of high-powered water cannons mounted on tripods. A sculpture of three ministers kneeling in prayer.

One sculpture literally unleashes fear on the unsuspecting visitor as vicious dogs leap out of the walls, lunging and snapping at passers-by, evoking the moment when terror was unleashed on schoolchildren.

After seeing the sculptures, Jan Hartsough said, "What was very powerful was the sculpture in the park of the dogs lunging out of the frame. It was so real. It was very powerful. I thought they really captured the feeling and the terror of what that would be like."

But the terror grew much worse in the following weeks. Across the corner from the museum is the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. It was a meeting place and organizing center for civil rights activists, and many marches began with processions heading out of the church doors.

Birmingham Church Bombing Takes the Lives of Four Girls

In the early morning hours on Sunday, Sept. 15, 1963, four members of the Ku Klux Klan planted a box of dynamite under the steps of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. At about 10:22 a.m., an explosion ripped through the church, killing four young girls, ages 11 to 14, and injuring 23 more. The bomb exploded just before the 11:00 a.m. church service began. The scheduled sermon that Sunday was entitled, "The Love That Forgives."

Martin Luther King showed the nation what those words truly mean, when he spoke of forgiveness and the redemptive power of suffering at the girls' funeral three days later. *The Love that Forgives.*

The bombing ended the lives of Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robinson and Denise McNair. The museum does a remarkable job of telling who those girls were and how their families and friends felt about them.

Full of Plans for a Future That Would Never Come

The museum's multimedia displays tell the stories of their lives at home and at school, portraying their youthful dreams and hopes. The exhibits somehow take these girls out of their historic role as martyrs and tragic heroines, and brings them alive again so we can see the young ladies that their parents and friends must have known — smiling and sunny and happy and all excited and full of plans for a future that would never come.

Then we are confronted by the explosion that destroyed those young lives. It is all the more heartbreaking because we have previously been given a concrete picture of who they really were — not martyrs for the ages, but kids with their whole lives in front of them..

The story of those four young girls haunted me after our visit for many weeks. I had long known the story of this infamous bombing, but the Birmingham museum described their young lives so vividly that you could *see* their youthful happiness, their hopes for the future, their love of their families.

All of that was erased, irrevocably shattered by the hate-filled violence of the bombers. While learning about their lives at the exhibits, I tried so hard not to be overcome, because this museum is about the way the civil rights movement defeated the forces of violence and hatred and racism. I know that we're supposed to "keep our eyes on the prize."

But I just couldn't. I brought back to my mind the way Dr. King consoled their parents, saying that these girls died nobly, as "the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity."

But I just couldn't feel that way, no matter how I tried. I couldn't help it. I wept.

Maybe it's because I'm a parent of three children, and each of them is sacred to me for a thousand different reasons. My son Daniel and daughters Ariel and Alyssa contain all of the meaning of my life, all of my love, all of my memories.

And those girls' parents had the same feelings and the same memories. And then their daughters were annihilated for no reason. Why were those particular girls chosen to suffer for the racism of adults? Why were their families left bereft and heartbroken, with an anguish no parent should have to experience?

Martyrs in Montgomery

The next morning, we traveled to Montgomery and visited the Civil Rights Memorial created by the Southern Poverty Law Center in remembrance of 40 martyrs murdered in the civil rights struggle.

The museum tour begins with a film about those martyred in the struggle for equal rights, and has multimedia displays so you can hear about the lives and deaths of each of the 40 martyrs. Once again, we heard the stories of Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robinson and Denise McNair. I wept again. I could not find any peace.

We walked outside to see the permanent memorial created by Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The memorial is a large circular black granite sculpture with the names of each of the 40 martyrs engraved in stone, while a thin sheet of ever-flowing water continually washes over their names. On the wall is a scriptural passage from Amos often cited by Martin Luther King: "Until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Visitors are encouraged to touch the engraved names. I touched the names of Addie, Cynthia, Carole and Denise, and then went around the circle to the engraved name of the final martyr: Martin Luther King, assassinated in Memphis.

The night before, I kept being haunted by a song sung by Holly Near and Ronnie

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May Day 2012 in Oakland

Photos by Ariel Messman-Rucker

Thousands of outraged protesters marched through the streets of Oakland on May Day 2012, demanding economic justice and an end to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A huge immigrant rights group left the Fruitvale BART station on a long procession to join other marchers in downtown Oakland.

Demonstrators represented Occupy Oakland, immigrant rights groups and labor unions. The march culminated in Frank Ogawa Plaza in downtown Oakland where more than 5,000 protesters rallied to demand an end to corporate greed and bank bail-outs, and to call for an economy that serves the needs of workers and poor people, rather than a system that is rigged for the rich. Many activists voiced outrage at the police brutality aimed at past Occupy protests.

May Day protesters in San Francisco occupied a vacant building owned by the S.F. Archdiocese, and were arrested.

The massive march in Oakland represented a new surge of energy for Occupy Oakland, and new hope for the future.

"Dignity and Resistance — May Day." **A huge and highly diverse outpouring of activists marched through Oakland streets.**

Federal Government Shreds Housing for the Poor

More than 1.46 million households must live on less than two dollars a day per person in the wealthiest country in the world.

by the Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP)

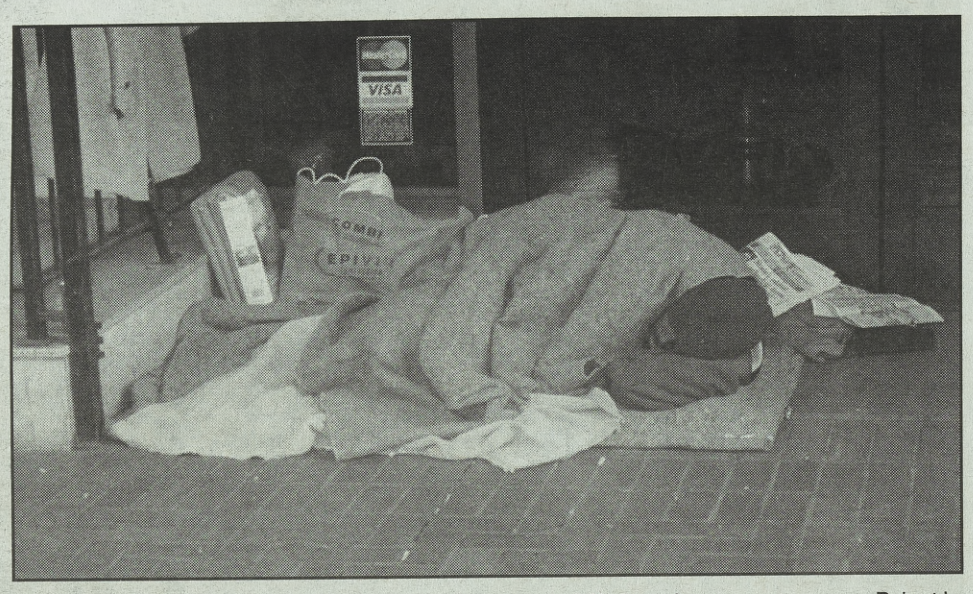
More than 1.46 million households are currently living on less than two dollars a day per person in the wealthiest country in the world. This level of poverty is more than double what it was in 1996.

This shameful fact has had an especially harmful effect on children, whose numbers in these households ballooned from 1.4 million to 2.8 million. Two dollars a day is the figure the World Bank uses to measure global poverty.

For people scraping by on two dollars a day, public housing, Section 8, and other HUD rental assistance programs are lifelines, very thin lifelines. For hundreds of thousands of households, these programs make the difference between having a home and being homeless. And yet, both Congress and the White House are now proposing significantly rent increases in these programs.

As of April 2012, tenants pay a minimum of $25 to $50 a month. The increases proposed in Rep. Biggert's (R-IL) ironically named "Affordable Housing and Self-Sufficiency Improvement Act" would raise the minimum to $69.45. The increase proposed in the President's 2013 budget would raise it to $75.

For families with children who live on less than $250 a month and food stamps, such increases could mean as much as a 200 percent rise in rent. Families would have to make excruciating choices between shelter, food, and medicine.



Deep cuts in federal housing programs threaten public housing tenants all across the country with extreme hardships and homelessness. Robert L. Terrell photo

Both Rep. Biggert and the White House argue that raising rents will increase revenues, lower the overall costs of the programs, and allow more people to receive assistance. These claims are specious at best. At worst, what they reveal is a political establishment far removed from or indifferent to the daily sufferings of those left behind by the new economic order.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the proposed hikes could expose nearly 500,000 households — which include 700,000 children and 40,000 elderly or disabled people — to extreme hardship and even homelessness.

Adding insult to injury, the Obama administration's 2013 budget request for public housing, Housing Choice vouchers, and Section 8 project-based rental assistance is $1.7 billion below the grossly underfunded spending bill of 2012. The automatic cuts to discretionary programs authorized by the Budget Control Act beginning in January 2013 will tighten the noose even more.

Newly rising rents and continuing deep cuts signal that the nation's most affordable housing is in peril at a time when millions of people can least afford it.

Congress is beginning its budget resolution process for 2013, one that could include President Obama's proposal to cut HUD's three major housing assistance programs and to raise minimum rents.

Housing advocates are calling on the Senate appropriations subcommittee that oversees HUD to reject the president's proposal and to renew housing assistance programs at 2012 levels instead. Advocates are also calling on legislators to give housing authorities discretion to not raise rent on their most vulnerable tenants and to increase hardship exemptions.

This is the very least we should do. But let's not lose track of the bigger picture as we get dragged from one crisis to the next. It is not poor people who are responsible for the country's fiscal woes; it is Washington, D.C,. and Wall Street. And yet it is poor people who are being targeted to suffer the most.

Over the last several decades, Republicans and Democrats alike have dismantled affordable housing programs, deregulated housing finance, and passed legislation enabling the privatization of public housing. These policies are part of a larger political agenda that ensures benefits flow to the top 10 percent while people at the bottom, especially people of color, immigrants, and the un-housed, are left with private charity, workfare programs, and the criminal justice system.

We can't put our hope in politicians and organizations that attempt to smooth out the edges of terrible legislation while people lose their homes and programs are gutted. In communities across the country, groups are joining hands to build a movement for the human right to housing.

We've all seen what can happen when a community defends a homeless encampment because no other shelter exists, keeps a family from losing their home through illegal foreclosure practices, and stops an SRO hotel from being turned into luxury condominiums, or a public housing development from being bulldozed.

The organizers behind these victories are beginning to connect their local housing struggles to one another. They are also doing the difficult work of organizing across issues by linking housing to education, health care, dignified work, immigrant rights, and economic security.

Together we will reclaim our communities from the greed and willful neglect emanating from the nation's capitol and create a society based on social justice.

Who Are These Children Dressed in Red?

from page 6

Gilbert, "Harriet Tubman." The song honors the life of Harriet Tubman — the Moses who traveled the South rescuing slaves, throwing them a lifeline and freeing them on the Underground Railroad.

"Hundreds of miles we traveled onward
Gathering slaves from town to town
Seeking every lost and found
Setting those free that once were bound."

"Setting those free that once were bound" — that is also an eloquent description of the civil right movement.

The song has an absolutely astonishing ending, a vision of a procession of martyrs, an image that will always bring to my mind the memories of the martyred daughters of Birmingham.

"Who are these children dressed in red?
They must be the ones that Moses led."

In my mind's eye, I saw the children dressed in red in a procession, and I had a haunting image of a long procession of martyrs on the streets of heaven, and at the very front of that march are those four young girls, and Rev. Martin Luther King, still witnesses to the freedom struggle and the violence that took their innocent lives.

Marchers dressed all in red — the color of martyrdom, the color of blood.

That night, unable to sleep, I kept hearing the song's disturbing question:

"Who are these children dressed in red?
They must be the ones that Moses led."

In my half-sleep, the last word kept changing from *Moses* to *Martin:*

"Who are these children dressed in red?
They must be the ones that Martin led."

For Martin had indeed led the marches from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church across the street to Kelly Ingram Park. And Martin paid the cost of conscience himself — arrested, jailed, his own house bombed, until finally he shared the martyrdom of the children dressed in red.

A Visit to MLK's Church

So there was only one place to go next — Martin Luther King's own church, the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church. But we had come to Montgomery on a Monday, a day when the church is closed and locked to all visitors.

By some unimaginable coincidence, Bettina Vernon happened to drive up to the church just as we were about to leave. Bettina is the church's tour director, and even though she wasn't supposed to give us a tour on this off day, she graciously invited us into the closed church anyway.

Then Bettina, who turned out to be as eloquent and knowledgeable as she was warm and friendly, gave us one of the most exceptional tours I have ever experienced. She showed us the large mural of King on the first floor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and pointed out every single one of the scores of civil rights activists portrayed in the mural.

One amazing image on the mural shows an angelic visitation to Martin in the jail cell where he wrote his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Martin's winged visitor comes through the jail bars and hands him a piece of paper with an inscribed Biblical passage: "Blessed are you when men persecute and revile you."

Bettina Vernon then took us on an overwhelmingly poignant tour of the rest of this church where Rev. Martin Luther King was a pastor. This church was to become the cradle of the civil rights movement when the first meetings to plan the Montgomery bus boycott were held.

The Cradle of Civil Rights

The civil rights movement really began in Montgomery in 1955 when the entire black community showed the world what dedication and solidarity could really mean. They walked, they prayed, they went to jail, they boycotted the bus system for an entire year, and they toppled the segregated bus system with one of the most brilliant and persevering nonviolent campaigns in American history.

The boycott began on Dec. 1, 1955, when Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to go to the back of the bus, and lasted until Dec. 20, 1956, when the courts ruled that laws requiring segregated buses were unconstitutional. Martin Luther King was there at the foundation as a planner of the bus boycott, and his church was a co-conspirator in the Freedom Movement.

I was overawed to see the pulpit where King preached, where he baptized, where he urged his congregation onward in the struggle for freedom, where he began to become a prophet.

We went upstairs and entered King's private study. On April 3, 1968, the day before his assassination, King said that he had received many threats on his life. But he said he was no longer fearing any man, because "I have been to the mountaintop."

I've always been amazed by his clairvoyance in saying the following words: "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land."

King's Clairvoyant Vision

I've always been so awestruck at the prophetic vision contained in those words and so heartbroken they came true the very next day. The day after uttering those words, King was assassinated in Memphis.

How did Martin know? Because God had let him go up to the top of the mountain and look over at the promised land.

So with all that in mind, it struck me so deeply to see on Martin's desk in his private study, a copy of *Ebony* magazine. It was the May 1968 issue of *Ebony,* the issue that came out right after his death, with a cover photo of Martin and his words: "I've been to the mountaintop."

I was devastated and overcome to see that. I imagined I saw Martin's spirit come into his study in May 1968, a month after his murder, to prepare a sermon, as he had so many times in the past. Then he sees the May 1968 *Ebony* magazine quoting from his speech, "I've been to the mountaintop."

Martin looks around his study one last time, and he knows he gave everything anyone ever could in the quest for justice, and to fulfill God's will. *Greater love has no man than this, that he lays down his life for his brothers and his sisters.*

All I could do was send a prayer of thanks to Martin Luther King, and thank God for letting me see his church. I carried away the haunting image of that magazine on the desk of his study, the May 1968 *Ebony,* the issue he never got to see while still in his physical being on this earth.

I told Bettina Vernon, the wonderful woman who gave us the tour, that this was one of the most joyful days of my life.

Campaign for New Priorities

from page 1

percent, and the top 10 percent held a whopping 80 percent of all the wealth.

Even though the United States spends more on health care than any other industrialized country in the world, 50 million Americans lack basic health care. Infant mortality rates here are higher than in Japan, Germany, England or Sweden. And 36 other countries have longer life expectancy then in America.

Poverty rates have risen to unprecedented levels. The number of Americans living below the official poverty line — 46.2 million people — was the highest in the 52 years that the Census bureau has been reporting on it. The 15.1 percent of Americans living below the poverty line last year was the highest level since 1993. Shockingly, more than one in five children live in poverty.

An estimated 1.56 million people, roughly 1 in every 200 people in America, used an emergency shelter or a transitional housing program during the 12-month period between Oct. 1, 2008, and Sept. 30, 2009. Between 2009 and 2010, evictions increased by 127 percent.

The foreclosure crisis has touched nearly every community, and made homelessness and the lack of affordable housing a nationwide problem. From the start of the recession in 2008 until March of this year, 3.3 million homes went into foreclosure. As of January 2012, one in every 14 homes were more than 90 days delinquent in their mortgage payments.

The gap between the rich and the poor has grown to historic levels. In 1980, the average CEO was paid 40 times what the average worker earned. By 2010, average CEO pay was almost 350 times that of the average worker.

Since 1979, the average income of the top 1 percent increased by $700,000, while the average income for the bottom 90 percent actually decreased by $900. The top 1 percent now receives 24 percent of the nation's income. In 2010, the richest 1 percent grabbed 93 percent of all of the income gain in the United States.

While those at the top enjoyed sharply rising incomes, the average family saw its income drop by more than $3700 in the decade of wars and recession, 2000-2011.

Although crime in America in general has decreased over the last 20 years, the country's incarceration rate is the highest in the world — higher than Russia and China combined. At the end of 2010, 2.3 million adults were incarcerated in America. In total, 7.2 million adults were under correctional supervision (probation, parole, jail, or prison) in 2009. The U.S. has one-quarter of all the prisoners on the planet, more than 35 European nations combined. Since 1995, the federal prison population has more than doubled.

In the last three years, 30 of America's largest corporations, like GE and Exxon, paid no taxes at all and, together, these 30 major corporations received over $10 billion in tax refunds. Oil companies alone scored $4 billion in tax breaks while at the same time earning record profits, and 1470 households earning more than $1 million a year paid not a single penny in taxes. On average, Bush-era tax cuts for the top 1 percent are worth more than what the average family makes all year.

Is it any wonder that so many people are outraged? And as bad as that is, it is not the whole story.

The fact is that real security is not provided by buying more guns. The most powerful military on the planet could not prevent the destruction on 9/11. Our country has been turned into "fortress America" to protect the interests of the 1% at the expense of the 99%. National security needs to be defined by more than our missiles, ships, planes and drones.

"IMAGINE PEACE." **U.S. peace activists are challenging the most powerful military in recorded history.** Carol Harvey photo

It's time to demand new priorities — ones that put the welfare of the people ahead of the welfare of Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Electric, General Dynamics and Bechtel.

The real threat to our security is measured by how many are unemployed or working part time while needing full-time work; how many lack healthcare; how many are homeless or at risk of losing their homes; how many schools are failing our children; how many youth drop out and can't find jobs that pay enough to raise a family; how many kids go to bed hungry; how many vets return with traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder, but can't get treatment; how many workers are fired for simply trying to join a union; how many clinics, elder care and day care centers close because local governments can no longer afford to keep them open.

We're now spending at the rate of $5,371.54 per second to prosecute the Iraq and Afghan wars. What we will spend this year on the war in Afghanistan alone is equal to cover all of the state budget deficits combined. Total national security expenditures since 9/11 come to $7.6 trillion, of which $1.36 trillion is the cost of the two wars, $230.3 billion for nuclear arms, $5.6 trillion for the Pentagon's core budget and $472.1 billion for Homeland Security.

We could cut our military budget in half and we'd still spend more than any other country in the world!

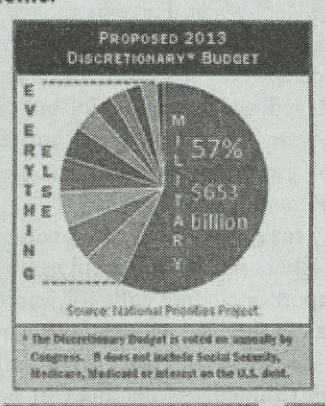
Our nation's priorities are out of whack. It's time to demand new priorities — ones that put the welfare of the American people ahead of the welfare of Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Electric, General Dynamics, Bechtel and KBR.

That's why antiwar activists, social and economic justice organizations, labor unions, faith groups and other organizations have come together to form the Bay Area Campaign for New Priorities (NPC).

NPC began by defining four core principles that all these different groups share: (1) ending the wars, bringing the troops home, and preventing any new wars; (2) moving resources from the military to restore the social safety net and meet social needs; (3) tax reform that forces the 1% and giant corporations to pay their share; and (4) investing in our communities by repairing infrastructure, replacing old schools, providing universal health care, providing affordable housing, creating jobs and protecting the environment.

Invest in the American People and Our Communities

Congress and the President can revive our economy by shifting budget resources from the Pentagon to where they belong, addressing our needs here at home.



OUR GOVERNMENT NEEDS NEW PRIORITIES

- **END** the war in Afghanistan, no new war with Iran
- **CUT** the military budget: meet domestic needs
- **TAX** the rich, the banks, the Wall Street speculators, the oil companies and other giant corporations
- **INVEST** in our communities, our infrastructure, and our environment to create **jobs** in a peaceful, sustainable economy.

The U.S. accounts for 42% of all military spending in the world – more than the next 14 nations combined.

Teachers, firefighters, cops and many others laid off, libraries, clinics, and state parks closed, social services cut.

2012 Military Budget cost Bay Area tax payers $14.8 billion and California taxpayers $60.5 billion.

The Bay Area Campaign for New Priorities has been endorsed by more than 80 organizations and 3,500 individuals, including many community and political leaders.
Visit: www.newprioritiescampaign.org/endorsers

HELP DELIVER THIS MESSAGE TO MANY MORE PEOPLE

CONTRIBUTE at the campaign's secure website at
www.NewPrioritiesCampaign.org/donate-to-new-priorities-campaign/.
or SUPPORT the campaign with a check to
New Priorities - Bay Area, 1737 Allston Way, Berkeley, CA 94703
CONTACT the campaign at NewPrioritiesCampaign@gmail.com
(Donations are not tax deductible)

Add my name to the list of endorsers of the New Priorities Campaign *(please print legibly)*

Name _____ Phone (____) _____
Address _____ City _____ Zip _____
Email _____ Tell me more about the Campaign ____
Organization _____
Signature _____

We value your support and respect your privacy. Information provided will not be shared or sold to any other organization or business. Providing your address will enable the campaign to provide you with occasional information specific to your Congressional District and community.

Return this form to: New Priorities - Bay Area, 1737 Allston Way, Berkeley, 94703

The Campaign for New Priorities has brought resolutions calling for these changes to city councils and asked them to adopt them and call on members of Congress to do the same. NPC is building support for the Budget for All sponsored by the Congressional Progressive Caucus.

NPC helped to form a national network of organizations with the same "move the money" objectives. The Campaign is now raising funds to put ads like the one here in *Street Spirit* in other publications and internet media to mobilize the public and put pressure on the politicians.

We agree with Frederick Douglass when he said, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

Join the Campaign for New Priorities to build a movement that can effectively demand a demilitarized foreign policy that invests in more diplomacy, not more weapons; an economy that supports everyone, not just the rich; and a society that cares for everyone, not just those with money, power and political connections.

Visit the NPC website at www.newprioritiescampaign.org or write to NPC at newprioritiescampaign@gmail.com. Donations to support this work may be sent to New Priorities-Bay Area, 1737 Allston Way, Berkeley, CA 94703.

Michael Eisenscher is the National Coordinator of U.S. Labor Against the War (USLAW) and co-founder of the Campaign for New Priorities and New Priorities Network.

How Mississippi Beat the South's Anti-Immigrant Wave

by David Bacon

In early April, an anti-immigrant bill like those that swept through legislatures in Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina was stopped cold in Mississippi. That wasn't supposed to happen. Tea Party Republicans were confident they'd roll over any opposition.

They'd brought Kris Kobach, the Kansas Secretary of State who co-authored Arizona's SB 1070, into Jackson, to push for the Mississippi bill. He was seen huddled with the state representative from Brookhaven, Becky Currie, who introduced it. The American Legislative Exchange Council, which designs and introduces similar bills into legislatures across the country, had its agents on the scene.

Their timing seemed unbeatable. Last November, Mississippi Republicans took control of the state House of Representatives for the first time since Reconstruction. Mississippi had been one of the last Southern states in which Democrats controlled the legislature, and the turnover was a final triumph for Reagan and Nixon's Southern Strategy.

And the Republicans who took power weren't just any Republicans. Haley Barbour, now ironically considered a "moderate Republican," had stepped down as governor. Voters replaced him with an anti-immigrant successor, Phil Bryant, whose venom toward the foreign-born rivals Lou Dobbs.

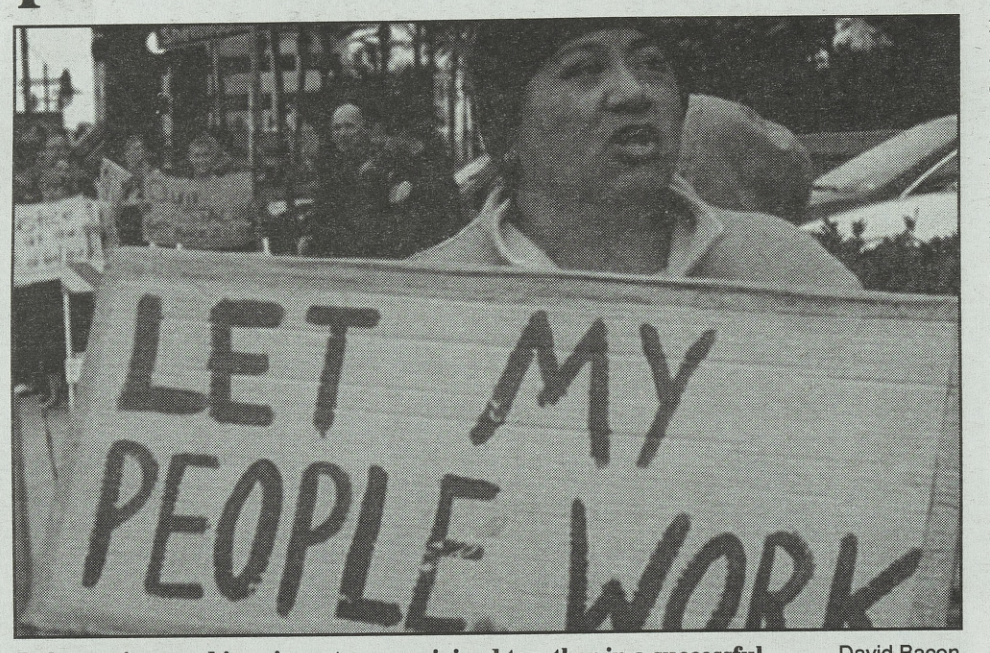
Yet the seemingly inevitable didn't happen.Instead, from the opening of the legislative session just after New Year's Day, the state's Legislative Black Caucus fought a dogged rearguard war in the House. Over the last decade, the caucus acquired a hard-won expertise on immigration, defeating over 200 anti-immigrant measures. After New Year's, though, they lost crucial committee chairmanships that made it possible for them to kill those earlier bills. But they did not lose their voice.

"We forced a great debate in the House, until 1:30 in the morning," says state Representative Jim Evans, caucus leader and AFL-CIO staff member in Mississippi. "When you have a prolonged debate like that, it shows the widespread concern and disagreement. People began to see the ugliness in this measure."

Like all of Kobach's and ALEC's bills, HB 488 stated its intent in its first section: "to make attrition through enforcement the public policy of all state agencies and local governments." In other words, to make life so difficult and unpleasant for undocumented people that they'd leave the state. And to that end, it said people without papers wouldn't be able to get as much as a bicycle license or library card, and that schools had to inform on the immigration status of their students. It mandated that police verify the immigration status of anyone they arrest, an open invitation to racial profiling.

"The night HB 488 came to the floor, many black legislators spoke against it," reports Bill Chandler, director of the Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance, "including some who'd never spoken out on immigration before. One objected to the use of the term 'illegal alien' in its language, while others said it justified breaking up families and ethnic cleansing." Even many white legislators were inspired to speak against it.

Nevertheless, the bill was rammed through the House. Then it reached the Senate, controlled by Republicans for some years, and presided over by a more moderate Republican, Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves. Reeves could see the widespread opposition to the bill, even among employers, and was less in lock step with the Tea Party's anti-immigrant agenda than other Republicans.



Labor unions and immigrant groups joined together in a successful movement to overcome anti-immigrant measures in Mississippi. David Bacon photo

Although Democrats had just lost all their committee chairmanships in the house, Reeves appointed a rural Democrat to chair one of the Senate's two judiciary committees. He then sent that bill to that committee, chaired by Hob Bryan. And Bryan killed it.

On the surface, it appears that fissures inside the Republican Party facilitated the bill's defeat. But they were not that defeat's cause. As the debate and maneuvering played out in the capitol building, its halls were filled with angry protests, while noisy demonstrations went on for days until the bill's final hour.

That grassroots upsurge produced political alliances that cut deeply into the bill's support, including calls for rejection by the state's sheriffs' and county supervisors' associations, the Mississippi Economic Council (its chamber of commerce), and employer groups from farms to poultry packers.

That upsurge was not spontaneous, nor the last-minute product of emergency mobilizations. "We wouldn't have had a chance against this without 12 years of organizing work," Evans explains. "We worked on the conscience of people night and day, and built coalition after coalition. Over time, people have come around. The way people think about immigration in Mississippi today is nothing like the way they thought when we started."

Evans, Chandler, attorney Patricia Ice, Father Jerry Tobin, activist Kathy Sykes, union organizer Frank Curiel and other veterans of Mississippi's social movements came together at the end of the 1990s not to stop a bill 12 years later but to build political power. Their vehicle was the Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance (MIRA), and a partnership with the Legislative Black Caucus and other coalitions fighting for progressive issues.

Their strategy has been based on the state's changing demographics. Over the last two decades, the percentage of African Americans in Mississippi has been rising. Black families driven from jobs by factory closings and unemployment in the north have been moving back south, reversing the movement of the decades of the Great Migration. Today, at least 37 percent of Mississippi's people are African-Americans, the highest percentage of any state in the country.

Then, starting with the boom in casino construction in the early 1990s, immigrants from Mexico and Central America, displaced by NAFTA and CAFTA, began migrating into the state as well. Poultry plants, farms and factories hired them. Guest workers were brought to work in Gulf Coast reconstruction and shipyards.

"Today we have established Latino communities," Chandler explains. "The children of the first immigrants are now arriving at voting age."

In MIRA's political calculation, blacks and immigrants, plus unions, are the potential pillars of a powerful political coalition. HB 488's intent to drive immigrants from Mississippi is an effort to make that coalition impossible.

MIRA is not just focused on defeating bad bills, however. It built a grassroots base by fighting immigration raids at the Howard Industries plant in Laurel in 2008, and in other worksites. Its activist staff helped families survive sweeps in apartment houses and trailer parks. They brought together black workers suspicious of the Latino influx, and immigrant families worried about settling in a hostile community. Political unity, based in neighborhoods, protects both groups, they said.

For unions organizing poultry plants, factories and casinos, MIRA was a resource helping to win over immigrant workers. It brought labor violation cases against Gulf employers in the wake of Katrina.

Yet despite being on opposing sides, employers and MIRA recognized they had a mutual interest in fighting HB 488. Both opposed workplace immigration raids and enforcement, which are based on the same "attrition through enforcement" idea.

Since 1986, U.S. immigration law has forbidden undocumented people from working by making it illegal for employers to hire them. Called "employer sanctions," the enforcement of this law (part of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986), especially under the Bush and Obama administrations, has caused the firing of thousands of workers.

Yet over the last decade, Congressional proposals for comprehensive immigration reform have called for strengthening sanctions, and increasing raids and firings.

"That's why we didn't support those bills," Chandler says. "They violate the human rights of working people to feed their families. For employers, that opposition was a meeting point. They didn't like workplace enforcement either. All their associations claimed they didn't hire undocumented workers, but we all know who's working in the plants. We want people to stay as much as the employers do. Forcing people from their jobs forces them to leave — an ethnic cleansing tactic."

During the protests, Ice, Sykes and others underlined the point by handing legislators sweet potatoes with labels saying, "I was picked by immigrant workers who together contribute $82 million to the state's economy."

MIRA also fought guest worker programs used by casinos and shipyards to recruit workers with few labor rights. "When it came to HB 488, employers were tactical allies," Chandler says. Unions, on the other hand, are members of the MIRA coalition. While MIRA and employers saw a mutual interest in opposing the bill, MIRA helps unions when they try to organize the workers of those same employers, and helps workers defend themselves when employers violate their rights.

MIRA, in fact, was started by activists like Chandler, Evans and Curiel, who all have a long history of labor activity in Mississippi. When HB 488 hit, buses brought in members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1529 from poultry plants in Scott County, Laborers from Laurel, Retail, Wholesale union members from Carthage, Black catfish workers from Indianola, and electrical union members from Crystal Spring.

The black labor mobilization was organized by new pro-immigrant leadership of the state chapter of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, the AFL-CIO constituency group for black union members.

Catholic congregations, Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Evangelical Lutherans, Muslims and Jews also brought people to protest HB 488, as did the Mississippi Human Services Coalition — a result of a long history working on immigrant issues.

Groups around MIRA and the Black Caucus not only fought that bill, but others introduced by Tea Party Republicans as well. One would ban abortions if a fetal heartbeat is detected. Another promotes charter schools. A third would restrict access to workers compensation benefits, while another would strip civil service protection from state employees.

Dr. Ivory Phillips, a MIRA director and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Jackson public schools, says that charter school proposals, voter ID bills and anti-immigrant measures are all linked.

"Because white supremacists fear losing their status as the dominant group in this country, there is a war against brown people today, just as there has long been a war against black people," he says. "In all three cases — charter schools, 'immigration reform' and voter ID — what we are witnessing is an anti-democratic surge, a rise in overt racism, and a refusal to provide opportunities to all."

Tea Party supporters also saw these issues linked together. In the wake of the charter school debate during the same period the immigration bill was defeated, a crowd gathered around Rep. Reecy Dickson, a Black Caucus member, in which she was shoved and called racist epithets.

"Because of our history, we had a relationship with our allies," Chandler says. "We need political alliances that mean something in the long term — permanent alliances, and a strategy for winning political power."

Despite the national importance of stopping the Southern march of the anti-immigrant bills, the resources for the effort were almost all local. MIRA emptied its bank account fighting HB 488. Additional money came mostly from local units of organizations like the UAW, UNITE HERE and the Muslim Association. "The resources of the national immigrant rights movement should prioritize preventing bills from passing as much as fighting them after the fact," Chandler warns.

On the surface, the fight in Jackson was a defensive battle waged in the wake of the Republican legislative takeover of the legislature. And the Tea Party still threatens to bring HB 488 back until it passes. Yet Evans, who also chairs MIRA's board, believes that time is on the side of social change.

"These Republicans still have tricks up their sleeves," he cautions. "We're worried about redistricting, and a Texas-style stacking of the deck. But in the end, we still believe our same strategy will build power in Mississippi. We don't see last November as a defeat, but as the last stand of the Confederacy."

Escaping from the Streets of Broken Dreams

Once again Joey was in darkness. Mitch was the light. His last words to Joey were, "You have to escape from the streets of broken dreams."

Short story by George Wynn

Some people lie down on the street at midnight and are dead at dawn. 64-year-old Mitch taught creative writing at a prison in the Great Northwest and had a weakness for the bottle, which intensified when he suffered the double whammy of a pink slip and divorce from a red-haired beauty half his age.

After months of depression and passivity, he arrived in the Golden State and wound up sleeping on the cold concrete of Golden Gate Avenue in San Francisco.

Mitch and the stocky fellow next to him stretched out their aching limbs. Mitch extended his hand and smiled, "Name's Mitch." The stocky man gave a firm handshake, "Joey."

"Let's have some cheese and French bread," said Mitch, while taking the food out of his big pack. He broke off a big piece of bread and sliced a hunk of cheese with his pocketknife and handed it to Joey, and cut a small piece of cheese for himself. Between bites, Mitch proceeded to tell Joey the story of his life.

"You've been around some bad dudes," said Joey.

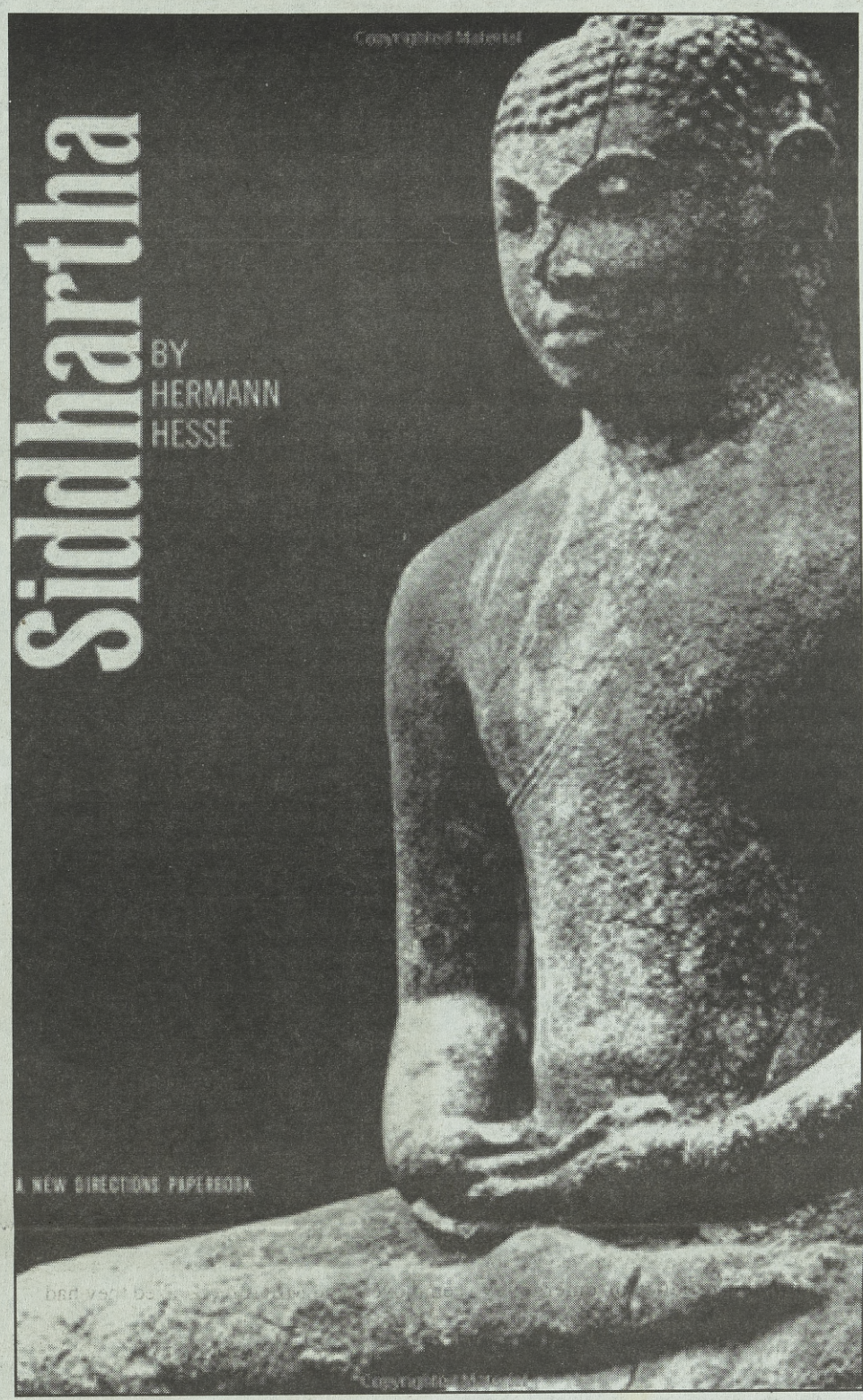
"They weren't all bad," said Mitch. "Lot of smart ones in prison."

"Guess so," said Joey, sounding unconvinced. "Anyway, I was a prizefighter, lost my left eye in the ring. Detached retina did me in. It's been a struggle ever since."

"I bet it has," said Mitch. "How's the cheese?"

"Good, real good," said Joey. Mitch talked to him in a language he could understand. They hit it off right away, perhaps because both men were honest, salt-of-the-earth types. The next day, Mitch gathered together some fishing gear and they went fishing down at the wharf. At Muni Pier, they cast for fish in silence with mindful intent, as if they were casting to quiet their troubled minds.

Slim, mustached Mitch gave Joey a dog-eared copy of Hermann Hesse's spiritual novel, *Siddhartha*. A few days later Joey reported, "Mitch, this is the best little book I ever read. I'm ready for another book."



The renowned New Directions Paperback edition of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*.

Mitch slapped Joey on the back, "Let's go to the Main." At the Main Library, he introduced his new friend to Hemingway's stories, which also engrossed Joey.

Around Mitch, Joey had a sparkle in his right eye. Something had been missing from his life before. When Joey dwelled on the aura of language, his body — grown cold during evenings spent on Tenderloin pavements — seemed to warm itself. Often, Mitch would drift off, preferring to drink in private, not bother anyone, not be a nuisance.

One evening, Joey turned a corner and saw a man of bulk rummaging through Mitch's pants and stripping him of his watch. Joey snatched the watch out of the man's hands.

"What the hell?" exclaimed the big man.

"This watch belongs to a good friend of mine. Walk away."

The big man stared at Joey but took a step back after seeing the wild look in Joey's eye, and the tension in the veins of his bull neck, vibrating with latent aggression, and the balled-up fists which still carried dynamite in either hand.

"Wasn't nothing but a cheap watch," said the big man and walked off.

Joey woke Mitch up, and said, "I got paid today for some casual labor work I did last week. We'll get a cheap hotel for the night."

"I owe you Joey," replied Mitch.

"No you don't. You taught me to grab on to life. I owe you!"

One morning, Joey woke to a terrible sense of big loss. Mitch didn't wake up. A combination of liver damage from booze and Tenderloin evening chills did him in.

Now Joey was left alone in this gentrified city with the dispossessed fighting over scraps. Once again Joey was in darkness. Mitch was the light. His last words to Joey were, "You have to escape from the streets of broken dreams."

"I'll try."

"Not good enough. Trying is dying. Promise me."

"I promise," said Joey. It was those words that led Joey to the Zen center where he meditated to quiet his mind and get focused, like Siddhartha Buddha of his favorite book.

After a month of steady, casual labor work, Joey decided it was time to leave. He would visit his 90-year-old grandmother in Kansas City whose ramshackle house was in dire need of repair. For several months, he dedicated himself to the world of wiring and roofing and painting and all kinds of odds and ends and patch-up work.

Suddenly one morning, just like Mitch, his grandmother didn't wake up. To Joey's amazement, she left the house to him. A neighbor told him, "She really appreciated your help and the other relatives were doing fine and you needed a break big time."

Joey got a job in a fast-food diner to pay off the mortgage. One evening, he saw a contest for inspirational people in the *Kansas City Star*. Joey sent in his submission about Mitch and to his disbelief he won.

"Imagine that, Mitch, I got published in the same newspaper where Hemingway got his start," he said out loud — as if Mitch was still around.

Living in the Dark Ages in Modern America

by Jack Bragen

People have a tendency to ignore the things that are the most obvious. A stimulus which is prevalent and constant is usually tuned out by the human nervous system. If someone lives in a house next to railroad tracks, and there is a noisy train that passes by every night at the same time, that person will learn to sleep through the noise without even noticing it. They say that the people who work at sewage treatment plants stop noticing the smell after working there awhile.

These examples are for the purpose of illustrating my next point. Our society is saturated with punishment. This fact is something we might not notice in our daily existence. In the present day, more incarceration facilities have been built in America than ever before.

It has become much easier to be locked up for violations of laws that often seem arbitrary and perhaps senseless. Large segments of our population are routinely incarcerated, in some cases with life sentences, due to the three strikes law in California and in many other states.

Two examples of this overuse of incarceration are people locked up for possession of marijuana, and those locked up with infractions that are incidental to having a mental illness.

Because of how easily someone can be locked up in prison for years at a time, in conditions that most people would consider horrible and inhumane, you could believe that we are in another period of Dark Ages.

Two additional supports for the Dark Ages comparison are the classism and the inequality of wealth that exist today. There isn't much of a ladder for the poor to lift themselves to prosperity and better conditions. There is less of a socioeconomic ladder than there was ten, twenty or thirty years ago.

Especially in the last ten years, we no longer have heard stories about people going from rags to riches. The pinholes in the dam seemingly have been sealed shut, and few lower-income individuals can squeeze through. Oprah Winfrey, Tyler Perry and J.K. Rowling are extremely rare exceptions, and those in charge of the monopoly board have made sure those successes aren't often emulated.

Technology has made many people's living conditions materially better than they have been in any previous time period, regardless of complaints about inequality. The Internet, in one fell swoop, has given a richness to the lives of perhaps billions of people, without the requirement of a Robin Hood stealing from the rich. The modern definition of poverty might have been considered an acceptable living situation a few hundred years ago. Additionally, the human species has become less ignorant.

There no longer exists an excuse for political leaders and for the wealthy people who influence them to allow the widespread poverty, hunger, disease, violence and incarceration that continue to mar the lives of a very large segment of the population of our planet.

Even though in many cases the awful conditions are relative, the fact that, because of technological advances, we could be doing much better for all people, bespeaks a horrendous injustice. The starvation, violence and disease that continue to exist in many places would not exist today if the people who hoard most of the wealth cared about helping their fellow human beings.

The disease that is the most prevalent, affecting more than half of the world's population, affecting many financially rich people as well as many poor, a disease for which we haven't found the cure: Human ignorance.

Massive Protest at Wells Fargo

from page 1

meeting, even though he had bought a share of Wells Fargo stock so he could make his voice heard by bank officials.

"I'm here today not just by myself ready to go to jail, but over a hundred people are ready to go to jail today and obviously Wells Fargo didn't let us in," said Rev. Howell.

Howell, pastor of Antioch Church Family, said he has lost many members of his congregation because high housing costs and ever-increasing foreclosures have driven people away from Antioch.

"They have lost their hope, and when fear sets in, then their faith is dominated by their fear and that's pretty bad," he said. "So my church went from several hundred down to about a hundred because the people have lost their homes, have moved away from Antioch. Their dream homes have become a nightmare."

Howell was arrested at last year's Wells Fargo's shareholders meeting with a group of outraged homeowners and community advocates who entered the meeting and refused to leave.

In a reference to Wells Fargo's use of the stagecoach as its corporate symbol, Rev. Howell told the crowd, "People used to rob the stagecoach. Now the Wells Fargo stagecoach is robbing us!"

Activists were not only protesting Wells Fargo's overpaid banking executives, predatory loans practices and its role in increasing the economic gap between the richest and poorest, but also for investing in for-profit, private-prison companies.

Wells Fargo profits from the private prison industry through its 7.24 percent stake in the GEO Group, one of the world's largest detention organizations, according to Stopwellsfargo.com.

Peter Cervantes-Gautschi, executive director of Enlace and the National Prison Divestment Campaign, came to the protest to demand that Wells Fargo stop financing the private prison industry, but police wouldn't let him inside the shareholders meeting.

"If we're going to have a humane system and any kind of justice, the financial industry led by these giants like Wells Fargo have got to stop propping the private prison industry up, which is in essence dictating our immigration policy," Cervantes-Gautschi said. "It's inhumane and has to stop,"

Some protesters with Wells Fargo shares were eventually allowed into the meeting, but 15 were arrested while inside and nine more were arrested outside, according to Occupy San Francisco.

Other demonstrators chained themselves together to block an entrance to the Merchants Exchange Building. They linked their arms through PVC pipes, making it nearly impossible for police to safely cut the shackles and arrest them.

"WE ARE THE 99%." Thousands marched from Justin Herman Plaza to protest Wells Fargo. Ariel Messman-Rucker photo

"We're here to stop the Wells Fargo shareholder meeting from going forward as long as they're continuing to make money off of taking families' homes away and saddling students with debt that they can't pay," union representative Sarah Norr said in an interview while chained to fellow protesters.

The problem isn't just with big banks taking advantage of the 99 percent, but also with the nation's leaders, she said.

"I think both parties have failed us in holding big banks accountable," Norr said. "Both parties have just bailed out the big banks and left homeowners on their own, left students on their own. So it's time for us to take things into our own hands."

Real estate broker Guadalupe Schmitt spoke out at the demonstration on behalf of the many homeowners she has seen lose their homes in foreclosures.

In an interview, Schmitt said, "I have worked with the community for over 20 years and I have seen how people have really struggled, families that have lost everything they ever had, who believe in the system and went and bought properties they can't afford because of the kind of loans that they got. And I think these loans were really designed to fail.

"The people that really struggled are hard-working people, people that have been trying to work with the banks to keep their properties, and the banks have not yet listened to them."

Sarah Norr chained herself to other protesters with PVC pipe to shut down the bank.

At the end of 2011, Wells Fargo & Co became the largest mortgage servicer in the nation with $1.82 trillion in loans serviced, according to Reuters.com.

Wells Fargo had $17.5 billion worth of foreclosures on its books as of June 2010, according to Stopwellsfargo.com.

Protesters used images of Wells Fargo CEO John Stumpf as a symbol of the unjust practices of the banking behemoth. Demonstrators held signs with his image emblazoned with phrases like "Wall St. Robber Banker," "They get rich, our community gets poor," and "They get rich, we lose homes, schools, services."

The Wells Fargo shareholders meeting went forward despite the protest, electing 15 new directors and approving a $19.8 million compensation plan for Stumpf.

Jeremy Cutler, 19, came to participate in the demonstration because he's angry that families like his are being forced out of their homes by banks like Wells Fargo.

Cutler was forced to drop out of middle school after his family home was foreclosed on. He has never been able to go back to school and now lives in a homeless shelter.

"My family lost their home in foreclosure and we've been bouncing around the country ever since," he said. "We have no place to stay."

Thousands of marchers show the signs of the times: *"Occupy Wells Fargo," "Abolish Student & Mortgage Debt," "Boycott Corporate Tax Evaders."* Ariel Messman-Rucker photos